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Netbooks Are Adorable, but Will They Last?

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You don't have to look at research data to see how popular netbooks have become. Just walk into your local Starbucks, and you're likely to see a few people with them.

Seeing all of these new, smaller computers made me wonder if the legal industry be willing to downsize their computers this radically? Would legal-specific software run on netbooks? And are we ready to change our "bigger is better" thinking and embrace the "do more with less" concept instead, or is this just a passing fad? I went in search for answers from ILTA members, legal technologists, the Twitter community and from personal experience — yes, I made myself a guinea pig for 30 days. The experience wasn't always pleasant, and at times it was tempting to fall back on my old technology.

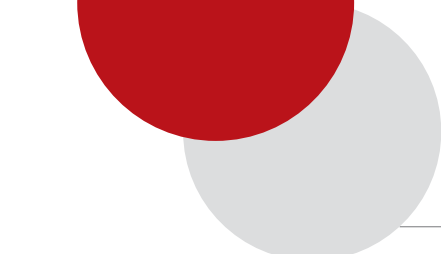
WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Let's start with the most obvious questions: what are netbooks, and what makes them different than laptops? There are generally four common characteristics of netbooks: they are inexpensive compared to laptops, compact, connect easily to the Web and offer extended battery life. Netbooks are, by definition, smaller than laptops. They are sometimes called subnotebooks or mini notebooks. That's not to say that they are always smaller. For instance, some of the newer netbooks are 12 inches,

which is the same size as an ultra portable laptop such as the Dell XPS M1330 that I use as my primary computer. The Lenovo IdeaPad S12 is huge when compared to some of the smaller netbooks, and the keyboard is almost a pleasure to type on. At the other end of the spectrum, the smallest netbook I've run across is 4.8 inches (UMID's mbook). This netbook has a display of 1024 x 600 and makes no attempts to come close in size to a standard laptop. But on average, you can plan on netbook screens ranging in size between 8.9 to 11 inches and offering adequate brightness and screen resolution.

Netbooks do not have built-in optical drives (CD/DVD), but you can work around that by connecting them to an external drive or to your network. Most people use a USB port to add a wired or wireless mouse because the touch pads on the netbooks leave a lot to be desired. Some netbooks are Tablet PCs. The ASUS Eee PC T101H, which is a 10-inch convertible tablet style netbook, should arrive in early 2010 and might make reappearance at the Consumer Electronic Show after its debut there last year.

While netbooks typically stack up well against their laptop counterparts in terms of weight and size, they don't when it comes to keyboards. No one that I've talked to likes typing on their netbooks. Keyboards are reduced 70 to 80 percent of a standard keyboard and the position of the keys is rearranged to accommodate the device. My hands are of average size, and the netbook that I ultimately decided upon, the ASUS Eee PC 1000HEs from ASUSTeK Computer Inc., boasted one of the larger keyboard sizes. After using it for 30 days, I still struggled with accidentally pressing the caps lock key. The Lenovo IdeaPad



S12 netbook has a large keyboard, but one thing that I keep getting thwarted by is that the function and control keys have switched places in the lower left corner.

A well fitting keyboard is akin to finding that perfect pair of gloves — you have to try them on for size. I recommend finding someone with a netbook that you can try out or a store with a liberal return policy before investing your money. Otherwise, you would purchase something that you won't be able to use comfortably.

Netbooks have an incredibly robust battery life. You can choose a six- or nine-cell battery with five to 10 hours of charge. Optimizing power settings from their defaults is required, just like any standard laptop. Some batteries are flush to the casing of the computer, while others are bulky and extend well out of the back of the computer and make the netbook sit at a slant. This is another reason why you should always “try before you buy” whenever possible.

Netbooks are designed to quickly gain access to the Internet, too. On a recent trip to London, my trusty laptop had difficulty connecting to a conference site while a coworker connected her netbook without any difficulties whatsoever.

The final distinction between a netbook and a standard laptop is a big one — and that's price. In this economy, we're looking to shave off every dollar possible to save money, and while netbooks might help you accomplish this, the question is at what cost. Netbooks cost substantially less, with prices ranging from US\$349 to around US\$500. That's more affordable than regular notebook computers which can cost four times this amount, but the trade-off could prove to be more costly.

FULLY UNLOADED

One of the reasons that the price point is low on netbooks is that they don't come preloaded with software. For instance, you wouldn't expect to pay US\$349 and get the computer, an operating system and Microsoft Office. At most, you can expect to get the netbook device, a pared down operating system and a trial version of Microsoft Works or something similar.

You might be surprised at the variety of operating systems on which netbooks operate. You can choose from Windows XP and higher, GNU/Linux, Google's Android, Apple Mac OS X, FreeBSD (Berkeley Software Distribution), OpenBSD, Darwin (Apple open sourced) and Moblin (Mobile Linux).

Dale Qualls from Pattishall, McAuliffe, Newbury, Hilliard & Geraldson LLP uses Windows XP on his netbook, but sees advantages for other operating systems as well. “Linux boots so quickly that I'd like to

have people use them for travel when they simply need to quickly boot up at an airport to check or send an e-mail message and don't have the time to wait for XP to load up. This is why Moblin is so cool — they're pushing for two-second boot times.”

When I purchased the ASUS Eee PC 1000HE model, it only came with Microsoft Windows XP Home, but given the option I would have selected a netbook with Windows 7. On Twitter, I asked the community how many people had installed Windows 7 on their netbooks and was surprised at how many people had done so. Brett Burney, an e-discovery and litigation support independent consultant, took this route and installed Windows 7 Ultimate edition on his Dell Mini 9 (2 GB RAM). He said, “After only a few minor hiccups, I've had no issues at all with running Windows 7 on the netbook.” Burney has also experimented with other operating systems, namely Ubuntu, Mac OS X and Windows XP.

Sean Brady, Applications Integration Manager for Vinson & Elkins is on his third netbook. His current model is the ASUS Eee PC 1005HA with 2GB of RAM, and it runs the Windows 7 Aero Glass UI without issue.

In May, the blogosphere was upset over “supposed” proposed Windows 7 netbook restrictions that would impose a three application maximum as well as other restrictions on netbooks running Windows 7. More recently, however, these restrictions have been allayed by Microsoft. There is a starter version that is only available in a 32-bit version, just like Windows 7 Home Basic, that is designed for entry levels and that is missing features found in the full versions. For instance, absent are Aero Glass, taskbar previews in Aero Peek, personalized desktop, fast user switching and XP mode. That said, those using Windows 7 at home or in the office will find a familiar interface which will ease the learning curve.

Since ILTA members need to run more than just an operating system, I decided to load up the netbook with some popular software and contact vendors to see whether they had experience running their products on the scaled down netbook computers.

• Microsoft Office Enterprise 2007:

Whether you use Office XP, 2003, or 2007, you will need the netbook to be capable of running some type of desktop application software. When running Microsoft Outlook and Microsoft Word simultaneously, there were no problems. When I added PowerPoint (or a third application) to the mix or when Outlook was open alone and I used the search feature, the netbook slowed down. The verdict is that if you are using Microsoft Office for reading a document, checking e-mail, or quickly reviewing a presentation (e.g. one process at a time), a netbook will serve this purpose.

• Metadata Removal Tools:

According to the ILTA's 2009 Technology Survey, most firms have either a commercially available metadata removal tool installed or one that was created in-house. Alan Fraser, President and

CEO of Workshare Inc. reports that they have tested their products on netbooks and they work fine. PayneGroup Metadata Assistant 2 and 3 both work well on the netbook, too. I ran Metadata Assistant both through e-mail and as a standalone, again without any problems.

- **Other Legal and Productivity Software:**

Linda Sackett of Legal MacPac and I had a great conversation about how tedious it would be to edit complex legal documents (like pleadings) on such a small screen, but we agree that it could be done. Her company has not had occasion to test its product on a netbook yet, but they welcome the opportunity should a customer request it. For the purpose of this article, we installed PayneGroup's Form Assistant and Numbering Assistant on the netbook, and they ran without any problem. The ribbons for the pleadings were visible; and, while you had to scroll to see the document, you could edit as you would on any other computer. DocsCorp reports that all of their products work fine on a netbook, too. Said Jim Lim, Global Research and Development Manager for DocsCorp, "We even have one of our developers using a Windows 7 netbook by HP to develop pdfDocs Desktop on transit to work." *Other vendors were contacted but did not respond.*

- **Connectivity:**

I installed BlackBerry Desktop Manager and Verizon's VZ Access Manager to keep in touch with my office and connect to the Internet. Both worked without any problem, although on the Windows 7 computer, I did have to install a new version of VZ Access. Ben Weinberger of Lathrop & Gage LLP bought an ASUS Eee PC that came with a Linux distro and OpenOffice pre-installed. His firm uses a Java-based SSL/VPN for remote access, and he had no problems linking up to it. His only negative experience was with finding drivers to enable the netbook to tether to his BlackBerry (he uses a TMO device that has unlimited data, so it's ideal for accessing the Web when on the road and would otherwise be forced to pay US\$10 a day for access).

Sean Brady of Vinson & Elkins pointed out that as more firms move from installed applications to cloud computing (OWA, wikis and knowledge bases, case management tools, document management), the netbook is becoming a better option.

ARE THEY OUR FUTURE OR A FAD?

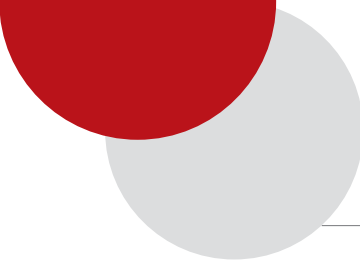
There is no denying that netbooks are popular. According to market forecaster DisplaySearch, which is a

part of the NPD Group, one in five portable computers out of all portable computer shipments worldwide in the second quarter of 2009 were netbooks. These are impressive numbers, but that doesn't guarantee that netbooks won't suffer the same fate as the pet rock, lava lamp or the Hustle.

Netbooks have a few things going for them, and one of the biggest is that, because of their popularity, large computer manufacturers are jumping on board in full force. Just a few vendors include ASUS, MSI, Lenovo, Samsung, Dell, HP and, more recently, Toshiba. Some of those names are kings in the standard laptop and desktop market, which means that they see how much money there is to be made with netbooks and want a piece of the pie. And what this also means is that we can expect to see many of these same vendors translate what works so well for the netbook market into their standard offerings — lighter computers, better Internet access, greater portability and more affordable pricing. When this happens, the line between netbooks (2-4 pounds and 8.9-11 inches), ultra portables (less than 4 pounds and 11-13 inches), general laptops (4-6 pounds and 13-15 inches), desktop replacement or development notebooks (more than 6 pounds and 16-18 inches) will begin to blur even further.

Price is an entirely different matter. You just aren't going to see the high performance of ultra portable or all-purpose laptop computers at the same price as netbooks. But manufacturers are learning that consumers who want to pay only US\$349 will sacrifice multimedia and multi-tasking. They know their market, and they know that many of us have two or three computers and carry different ones depending on the circumstance. Ross Kodner, Esq. of MicroLaw until recently carried two computers with him, one of which was a Lenovo IdeaPad S10. He still carries the netbook, but he has decided to leave his laptop workhorse back at the office. I haven't gotten to this point because my ultra portable laptop offers so much more than the netbook and only weighs 8 ounces more, but I can see where it can be an attractive alternative depending on what you predominately use your computer for while you are on the road.

Security is getting better on netbooks, but it won't be as robust as what you will find within your organization simply because most netbook operating systems are designed for home users or because of reduced processing capabilities. One thing to make sure you do when the netbook arrives is to set a password. And it's probably not a good idea to keep client documents saved on the netbook because the same security software and encryption most likely



hasn't been loaded. To get around this, some firms with emerging netbook user populations are beginning to distribute secure drives to be used for data storage. Risk management policies should be expanded to include document security and retention on a netbook. According to a recent article in PCWorld.ca, security for netbooks and ultra portables in general should be of great concerns to businesses. If firms put proper policy and procedures in place, however, many of these vulnerabilities can be minimized.

THE VERDICT

Netbooks have many advantages. The more people use them, the more they will evolve to meet our needs. But ILTA members and the legal industry in general cannot be proving grounds because of the risks involved in what we do. Many firms just aren't willing to take a chance on the new technology. Not yet at least — or are they? Here's the final verdict.

At PayneGroup, we've started adding them to our general laptop pool, and those who want a netbook can have one, provided that they take additional security precautions that we stipulate in advance. While the keyboard is not ideal, it's still easier to use than a BlackBerry, and you have more options for editing documents on a netbook or connecting to the office.

Part of the appeal is the compact size of the netbook. Dale Qualls said his ASUS Eee PC netbook is small and light and fits right into the saddle bags of his motorcycle so it goes anywhere. His firm, on the other hand, doesn't have plans to roll out netbooks to the general population anytime soon.

Nathan Smith from McKee, Voorhees & Sease, P.L.C. agreed that they have no plans to add netbooks. "I find the screen geometries to be odd and too small. The other reason is that the attorneys often start out saying 'I just want to (browse the Web, check e-mail, whatever).'

Seemingly fine tasks for a netbook. But it doesn't stop there, next thing you know they want to do actual work on it, and the tools are different; and, before you know it, you are supporting a unique platform you didn't ask for."

Sean Brady said that while Vinson & Elkins has not yet purchased any netbooks, doing so is something that management has been discussing. This topic is something that I believe will be on many administrators' lists in the coming months.

Ben Weinberger said that Lathrop & Gage LLP intends to purchase a significant quantity of netbooks to provide as loaners and that many people there have already expressed interest in carrying something smaller than the typical "full" laptop.

So it seems that netbooks might be around for a while longer, and they will continue to improve. At the same time, I'm hoping laptops and netbooks will continue to meet somewhere in the middle; perhaps by creating a subultra laptop computer that has a 10-hour battery, costs under US\$800, weighs three and a half pounds and yet has all of the functionality of my current ultra portable Dell laptop. One can always dream at least. **ILTA**



Donna Payne is CEO of Payne Consulting Group. She is the recipient of the first ever Consultant of the Year award given by *Law Technology News*, and the Lex Proficio award for lifetime service advancement of legal software and publishing. She is a frequent speaker at legal and technical conferences worldwide and has spoken to Congressional committees, the Senate, and at international judicial conferences on the subject of metadata and preventing accidental disclosure. Donna is a columnist for several legal and technical publications and writes a monthly column, "Test Drive" for *Law Technology News*. She has been featured in syndicated articles on women in technology. Donna and Payne Consulting Group have authored 12 books on Microsoft software and are creators of Metadata Assistant, Forms, Numbering and Outlook Send Assistants. Payne is a Platinum sponsor of ILTA.